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COMMUNITY MEDIA: EMPOWERING THE MASSES

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THE DIGITAL MILLENNIUM: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ASIAN MEDIA
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1. Introduction

Currently the spread of the Internet in emerging economies such as India is confined mostly to selected large urban conurbations. While this is not ideal, such a situation is no different from the standard pattern of lopsided development in emergent economies. Indeed that, urban areas benefit far earlier from socio-economic infrastructure development is (and has been) the norm all over the world.

Though slow on the uptake, more recently the Indian government and administration - at state and union/central level - is attempting to rectify this situation. At the state level, Gujarat has taken the lead in drawing up a plan of action to enable widespread access to the Internet from non-urban and/or remote locations. In particular, it focuses on the government aim of establishing two thousand Internet kiosks in the non-urban areas. Apart from putting in place the necessary infrastructure, it is also devoting considerable time and energy to ensure that end users will have access to content (information and service) that is of immediate and direct relevance (and in both major languages of the state - Gujarati and English). During the initial phase – and one in which the author is closely involved – the content will include basic information on and about all Government of Gujarat departments, organizations and affiliates.

Finally, we conclude with a brief evaluation of the policy being implemented.

2. Government of Gujarat Objectives

1- To establish public access Internet kiosks in state of Gujarat.
2- To develop, deploy and maintain an Internet portal Gujaratonline.com primarily aimed at offering relevant information and services of all departments of Government of Gujarat.

2.1 Current Situation

Currently unfettered Internet access via dedicated ISP’s is confined to a tiny urban minority. The main reasons for such a relatively shallow and narrow penetration are:

1. Poor telecom infrastructure – on an average there are around 2 telephones per 100 people in India. The situation within Gujarat (the second largest in terms of GDP) is somewhat better.
2. Low PC ownership - percentage of PC owners is even less than that of telephone ownership. Though this limitation is being bypassed with the advent of Internet access via mobile/cell phones (which is gaining in popularity).
3. Limited ISP’s - till late 1999 the state owned telecom monopoly, VSNL, controlled the few ISP’s that had been set up in about 10 largest urban centres. Lately the potential of Internet has induced the Indian Government to allow private ISP’s set
up though at the time of writing international access gateways remain under VSNL's stultifying and chronically under resourced control.

4. High access charges a poor service – Internet access remains relatively expensive, and is of uniformly poor quality. Entry of private ISP’s has resulted in some improvement but this remains patchy, subject to vagaries of state telecom authority. Dedicated lease lines provide more secure access but is exorbitantly expensive – on average ten times the going rate in the US! Not much is expected to change till the telecom industry is opened up (as expected in 2004).

5. Business users - though slow to begin with this group of users has recently become the fastest growing. E-commerce is the major driving force, though most are located in urban areas and certainly very few pretend to address a largely non-English speaking, rural audience (which make up the overwhelming majority of India’s population).

Even more critically and as might be expected local content - particularly in non-English Languages - is negligible. The main reasons for this are:

1- High correlation between urbanized elite with a cosmopolitan outlook, with a far greater affinity to English and western culture and Internet users.
2- Lack of adequate software for Indian language (non-roman) scripts. Dedicated keyboards are virtually non-existent.

3. INTERNET KIOSK PROJECT

The Government of Gujarat has put in place an IT policy that includes various activities such as software development business, IT skills training, IT enabled services and E-governance. Right from the outset it has realized that the benefits of IT in general and the Internet in particular need to be made available to the widest possible audience.

In order to ensure this, it has put a particular emphasis on upgrading telecom infrastructure and in particular to lay a communication statewide backbone. This would provide access to the Internet from at the very least all district level administrative unit. To jumpstart the use of Internet it was decided to provide assistance towards the setting up of at least two thousand Internet kiosks (analogous to public telephone booths that were similarly set up to enable access and popularize the use of long distance telephonic services).

As part of the aim to ensure popular interest and utilization of Internet kiosks, the Government of Gujarat has placed an equal emphasis on the development of relevant and useful content and services. In the initial phase (on which the author has carried out some work), this content and services are focused on rendering the government own services accessible via the Internet.

In the rest of this section gives more details on our approach to content development and deployment on the Internet.

3.1 Scope of Content Development

To develop, deploy and maintain an Internet portal Gujaratonline.com primarily aimed at offering relevant information and services of all departments of Government of Gujarat.

As appropriate, such information and services to be offered via information kiosks and call centers. Where no online connectivity is possible suitably formatted information will be distributed to information kiosks on CD’s (regularly updated).
3.2 Main Features of Gujaratonline.com

1. Provide online information and services of all departments of Government of Gujarat.
2. Information and services to be accessible in real time and non-stop (24x7x365).
3. To offer appropriate connectivity with existing websites of Government of Gujarat departments and associated institutions, corporations, etc.
4. Ensure online access via Information Kiosks being set-up by Gujarat Government.
5. Wherever online access is not feasible, information kiosks will be supplied with regularly updated CD's of the portal content.
6. Portal content to be updated on periodic and as and when basis.
7. Portal upgrades on regular basis to ensure state of the art service to end users and optimising E-governance.
8. All information and services to be provided in Gujarati and English.

3.3 Phase One Proposed Services

1. Standard information on all government departments and activities. Wherever appropriate connectivity with existing websites (such as that offering information on Government Resolutions and notifications).
2. Downloadable applications forms for a range of government services (eg: ration card, driving license, etc). In time the service to be extended to online submission of such forms to appropriate departments/authorities.
3. Link with Agricultural Produces Market Committee (APMC) software to offer market price information. This would be particularly beneficial to rural farmers planning to take produce to market(s).
4. Bus and Railway Schedules and reservation services.
5. Information on government funded/supported employment schemes, of which there are several hundred, together with on-line registration facility.
6. Online clinical services like information related to hygiene, treatment of common ailments and medicinal care.
7. Webcast of examination results (such as 10th and 12th grades and college/university results).

3.3 Other Portal Features

1. User friendly interface to ensure widest possible access.
2. Further enhance accessibility by exploiting Audio/Video features.
3. Online help, navigational tips, site maps, etc particularly for novices.
4. Offer Email services to end users and info kiosks.
5. Ensure optimal performance with state of the art database management.
6. Portal uptime to be 99.5% and above.
7. Links to associated and other popular websites.
8. Encourage other service providers to participate.
9. Web usage reports.
10. FTP access to contents.

4. Concluding Remarks

The overall project aims are in the right direction; it makes sense to develop telecom infrastructure to sustain wider access to the Internet. Combining this with support for content creation will help ensure that potential users are motivated to use the new technology. The Government of Gujarat, however, should also encourage private players to develop content and services that meet the requirement of a wider, non-urban, non-English speaking and often illiterate audience.
RETHINKING WORK IN THE INFORMATION

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